



To bravely go

A workshop on emerging trends in veterinary education drew out some bold – and unsettling – views of the profession’s future. VCNZ’s **Wayne Ricketts** beams back a vision from VET2031.

“**THE PURPOSE OF** looking into the future is to disturb the present.” That was the opening quote at the VET2031 workshop hosted by the Australasian Veterinary Boards Council in December and facilitated by veterinarian Paul Higgins, who has a master’s degree in strategic foresight. This fifth biennial Australasian Veterinary Education Forum was aimed at identifying emerging issues and trends and how they affect veterinary education and registration.

Workshop attendees were drawn from a wide range of backgrounds and included clinicians, veterinary educators, government officials, regulators and veterinary business operators, as well as recent graduates and veterinary students. Participants were asked to think laterally – no mean feat, as we all tend to see the future based on existing patterns of recognition, particularly technical experts.

Several scenarios were developed by attendees in advance of the conference. Here’s a taste of them:

- » Mobile technology diagnoses and prescribes treatments for animals.

- » Mammalian protein replaced by piscine protein, vegetable protein or artificial protein (already here).
- » Companion animals no longer owned individually but housed in collections where humans can visit to pet or borrow them.
- » Veterinarians no longer teachers of knowledge, but knowledge managers.
- » Clinicians are publicly scored (like Uber drivers).
- » Artificial intelligence-related technology (using algorithms) is more accurate at diagnosis than humans (happening to some degree in the radiology space).
- » The use of terms such as ‘distributed trust’, ‘block chain technology’ and ‘the internet of things’.
- » Veterinarians who are data-, market- and finance-savvy, positioning themselves in the One Health space. There they will be working at the overlap between animal, human and environmental health, with a healthy dose of public health, certification and auditing services, big data mining and animal welfare consultancy.

We heard about Richard and Daniel Susskind’s book *The Future of the Professions: How Technology Will Transform the Work of Human Experts*¹. They claim that the days of the professions are over. Technology will offer alternatives that will displace much of the current professional workforce, with professionals replaced by technicians and paraprofessionals using artificial intelligence and machines to perform our roles. The authors envisage a model where most professional advice will be available free to users.

Susskind and Susskind talk about the traditional ‘grand bargain’ concept, whereby appropriately qualified and trained professionals deliver expert, up-to-date, affordable, accessible and reliable services in return for independence, autonomy and rights of self-determination. They suggest this grand bargain with the professions is now failing “economically, technologically,

psychologically, morally, qualitatively, and in terms of their inscrutability”.

Two quotes from the workshop stood out for me. The first suggested that “the veterinary profession needs to find a role in global crisis management and engage in projects of international development”. And: “Veterinarians should become global health professionals, understanding the importance of adequately functioning ecosystems and the importance of biodiversity, and ensure that the One Health approach (particularly environmental considerations) gains political traction.”

Remember the lifeboat test parable? In the allegory, humans have to abandon Earth with a limited number of lifeboats. According to this test, only a few veterinarians would be given places in the lifeboats, including some public health veterinarians, a research veterinarian or two, food animal practitioners, food inspectors and laboratory diagnosticians. Sorry, small animal clinicians, no room.

On the subject of education, we discussed the move to a more collaborative approach where students drive a lot of their learning. We heard about the application of virtual and assisted reality to the curriculum, and about a future veterinary degree that could essentially be based at one university but augmented by subjects taken from partner universities that offer greater level of expertise. We heard that the profession needs to become more diversified and that that needs to be reflected in veterinary education, involving basic or core veterinary degrees with early specialisation. For example, students wishing to become clinicians would serve apprenticeships with practices because veterinary teaching hospitals will no longer exist.

We were treated to a thought-provoking and challenging look at future possibilities – remember Star Trek! 🖖

REFERENCES:

1. **Susskind R, Susskind D.** *The Future of the Professions: How Technology Will Transform the Work of Human Experts.* Oxford University Press, 2015.
2. **Leighton FA.** Veterinary medicine and the lifeboat test: a perspective on the social relevance of the veterinary profession in the 21st century. *Canadian Veterinary Journal* 45, March, 2004.